

ARTICLE APPEARED
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BALTIMORE SUN
10 April 1986

NATION

Official secrets and propaganda ploys: a thin line

WASHINGTON — As a courteous guest, CIA Director William J. Casey began his remarks to the nation's newspaper editors yesterday with a few pleasant words about the similarity of the news and intelligence professions and their shared devotion to the national interest.

Then, however, he returned to a more usual adversary stance. He complained that in recent years, publication of classified information has destroyed valuable U.S. intelligence sources and deprived citizens of protection against terrorism.

Even as Mr. Casey spoke, the Associated Press was distributing a story by White House reporter Dale Nelson about how U.S. intelligence has learned of Muammar el Kaddafi's encouragement of further attacks on this country, and how the Reagan administration is agreed that we must retaliate.

Shortly afterward, Pentagon officials confirmed that American aircraft carriers in the Mediterranean were changing plans in order to be ready for a strike against Libya if that was ordered.

Were these stories examples of the damaging publications Mr. Casey cited to the editors?

What our intelligence network has learned about the intentions of a hostile leader, any decision to retaliate against an enemy and the movement of combat ships all are matters usually considered to be highly classified.

Yet the stories in question were not stolen from a government safe, or handed over to the reporter at a secret rendezvous, or leaked by a disgruntled or disloyal public servant.

They were disclosed intentionally by "a senior administration official . . . familiar with the thinking of top government officials and who spoke on condition he not be identified," and by "Pentagon sources" who were equally reluctant to have their names used.

Rather than demonstrating the damaging publications that concern Mr. Casey, those stories prove what Howard Simons, curator of the Nie-man Foundation at Harvard University, told the American Society of Newspaper Editors in response to the CIA director.

Mr. Simons, former managing editor of *The Washington Post*, as-

serted that most news leaks in the capital are in fact "official" leaks, intentionally placed to promote government policy.

He is correct. By far the most important disclosures of U.S. plans, intentions and capabilities come from high officials who calculatedly plant that information to their own advantage.

Sometimes it is a Pentagon official revealing something new about Soviet weapons — just in time to influence congressional voting on a new defense budget.

Sometimes it is the president himself, as when he referred editors yesterday to testimony from a former chief investigator with the Nicaraguan Interior Ministry, now edited and published by the State Department. Not incidentally, the House is scheduled to vote again next week on aid to the "contras."

It can even be the CIA director, who told a Washington audience last weekend that Cuban troops and Soviet advisers are "feverishly preparing a campaign, likely to be launched this month, designed to wipe out forces resisting the Marxist government of Angola." Quite often in the past, the source of such information has been the national security adviser to the president, a man who neatly fits the description of "senior administration official . . . familiar with the thinking of top government officials."

Such an official said yesterday that the administration had been divided, with Defense Secretary Caspar Weinberger resisting the urging of Secretary of State George Shultz that the United States retaliate against Libya, even if innocent civilians were killed. Now, that official told the AP, "there's a meeting of the minds," with both sides agreed on the need to strike back.

Lives have been lost, millions of dollars have been paid, international crises have been gambled in the effort to get that kind of information about the thinking inside foreign governments. Yet it was put out in Washington yesterday, free of charge or risk to life, by men who on another day will join Mr. Casey's complaints about disclosure of official secrets.

This week, it fits administration purposes to put Colonel Kaddafi on warning that retaliation awaits his next move. It fits White House strategy to reignite public concern about

the Sandinistas in advance of next week's House vote. It fits the policy line to raise consciousness about Angola to justify the shipment of Stinger anti-aircraft missiles to anti-Marxist forces there.

Another day, for the press to publish the same information from some other source would stir the wrath of the president, CIA director and every other figure in the administration's elaborate public relations machinery. Understandably, they want to reserve the right to decide for us when and how a secret becomes a propaganda ploy.

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